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ABSTRACT

The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLI) provides first degree courses to local residents over the age of 18 by distance education. Distance education is characterized by its urban quality, where "distance" is more often social than geographic. Hong Kong is highly organized and compact with an efficient public transportation system. Face-to-face meetings of students and tutors seem more convenient and preferable than for distance teaching institutions of other countries. Because of efficient mail and courier systems, personal contact between tutors and students by post and phone poses no problem. Due to cramped living conditions, provision of study space is deemed an essential part of OLI's support for its learners. An evaluation survey is conducted twice each year, at the end of each semester. A questionnaire gathers quantitative and qualitative information. Students' opinions are obtained on a Likert scale; comments and suggestions are collected in an unstructured format. Findings indicate the following: only 13 percent feel English language course materials are difficult to understand; OLI-developed courses are satisfactory from an instructional design standpoint; students find telephone tutoring more acceptable as they gain experience in using it, but few use it; students tend to rely on tutorials; students desire more detailed assignment comments and suggestions; and students are satisfied with OLI's study support system. (YLB)

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# Distance education in an urban environment: Experience of the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong

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## THE OPEN LEARNING INSTITUTE

The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLI), a tertiary institution established by the Hong Kong Government in 1989, provides first degree courses to local residents over the age of 18. Currently, there are some 17,500 students enroled in 65 courses. The OLI plans to offer at least ten degree programmes and approximately 120 courses in the next four years through its four Schools (Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Administration, Education and Science and Technology) and a Centre for Continuing and Community Education. The Institute delivers courses by distance education and adopts an open entry policy: students do not require formal academic qualifications. However, the Institute exercises tight control over exit performance to ensure its degrees are of the same standard as local and international institutions (OLI, 1989, 1992; PCOLI, 1989).

In addition to developing and delivering course materials, the OLI provides a support and administrative system to assist students. This support includes: (1) allocation of tutors to students; (2) arrangement of face-to-face tutorial sessions; (3) day schools and surgeries for discussion and problem solving; (4) provision of tutors' feedback to individual students on their performance on assignments ('tutor-marked assignments'); and (5) academic counselling by telephone.

Support mechanisms for student learning envisioned by OLI's planners are today provided. We believe that such support is vital for students' success in their studies. But do students feel the same about them? After all, students are the ones actually involved in a learning process, and they do interact with the support and administrative system of the OLI. Their feedback is invaluable for improvement of course materials and our support system. As well, we need to know how our students respond to distance teaching methods in a compact urban environment, one which not only imposes particular problems, but also offers the opportunity to meet learners' needs in unique ways. Finally, we want to know how OLI's students are adapting to a new ways of teaching and learning which differ from prevailing conservative traditions.

## HONG KONG'S DISTANCE LEARNERS

Distance learning in Hong Kong is characterised by its urban quality where 'distance' is more often social than geographic. Data quoted below were obtained from a sample of OLI students in a survey conducted by the Open Learning Institute in 1990. They were reported earlier together with data from other Hong Kong, non-OLI distance learners (see Kember et al, 1992, Yuen, 1991).

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**The problem of 'distance'.** The Territory of Hong Kong is highly urbanised and compact with a very efficient public transportation system. It generally requires approximately one hour to reach any part of the Territory using ferries, subway and surface trains, buses and streetcars. We find it takes most students (75%) less than sixty minutes to commute from home or office to their tutorial or study centre. Face-to-face meetings of students and tutors seem to be more convenient and preferable than for distance teaching institutions of developed countries.

Hong Kong has efficient mail and courier systems. Local postage is inexpensive and mail is delivered in one day. The Territory also has a high-penetration and inexpensive internal telecommunication systems; nearly all Hong Kong families have a telephone and local calls are free. Hence, personal contact between tutors and students by post and phone poses no problem.

**Study space requirements.** Hong Kong has a population of six and a half million living on 1000 square kilometres of land. Most people live in high-rise apartment buildings with relatively small floor space. We find that the majority (70%) of our students' families occupy a housing area of 200-600 square feet. The average household size is 4.7 people, and the average living area per person is about 130 square feet. Therefore, provision of study space is deemed an essential part of OLI's support for its learners.

**Learning styles and practices.** Although people in Hong Kong are exposed to Western styles and values, there is a common feeling that Hong Kong learners are still conservative when it comes to learning. The following evaluation findings may assist providers of distance education products to offer Hong Kong learners appropriate courses in terms of content and administrative support.

## EVALUATION OF OLI COURSES

The OLI has always been aware of the important need to evaluate the courses it offers. When courses are completed, an intensive evaluation is conducted to gather students' feedback on course materials and the supporting system. Such evaluations reflect student's acceptability of the study materials and the distance learning mode of study (see for example Dhanarajan, 1984), and inform the institution broadly whether it is doing a good job.

An evaluation survey is conducted by OLI's Educational Technology and Publishing Unit twice a year, at the end of each semester. It takes the form of a questionnaire which solicits students' opinions on various aspects of courses, and records their comments and suggestions. The first evaluation, conducted from March through April 1990, evaluated all courses offered in the October 1989 semester. To date, five surveys have been completed and a sixth is in progress. A similar questionnaire was used in all surveys.

Samples of students were randomly selected. In general, a sampling fraction of 1/5 was used. The samples of participants for our first five surveys are provided below.

Our questionnaire gathers both quantitative and qualitative information. Students' opinions on various aspects of courses are obtained in a Likert scale, and comments and suggestions are collected in an unstructured format. Initially low return rates (31% in the first survey and 21% for the second) were boosted to nearer 50% by using a reminder letter.

*Table 1 Sample of students surveyed*

| Data collected in | Number of courses surveyed | Courses ending in | Number of questionnaires mailed | Valid questionnaires returned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| May 1990 | 8 | March 1990 | 1130 | 346 |
| Nov 1990 | 10 | September 1990 | 1529 | 327 |
| Apr 1991 | 9 | March 1991 | 1241 | 615 |
| Oct 1991 | 11 | September 1991 | 1281 | 523 |
| Apr 1992 | 9 | March 1992 | 1098 | 521 |

## COURSE MATERIALS

**Language.** English is a second (or other) language for our predominantly Chinese learners. However, most have experience in studying in English as many secondary schools use it as the medium of instruction. The OLI is anxious to know if students have problems with its English language course materials.

Only 13% of respondents feel that course content is difficult to understand. Generally, therefore, study difficulties are not due to content. In all surveys, approximately one-quarter of respondents find they do not understand some English words in course materials. And about 25% of students agree that the sentences used in the course materials are long and complex.

**Instructional design.** Most (90%) agree that "OLI courses use a warm and personal tone throughout the study units". In general, the majority agree that "all course materials are identifiable and adequately described". There is an increasing trend in students who hold this view (from 59% to 66%).

About 70% of the learners respond that "course content is directly related to the objectives of the course." The majority of learners (above 60%) agree that "the presentation of course content in each unit is clear and easy to follow". Students in general agree with the statement that "the course is free of cultural, racial and gender biases in its content".

About 70% of learners assert that unit summaries help them learn and this percentage is gradually increasing. Most students (above 70%) think that assignment questions are relevant to course content and that the number of assignment is appropriate. Positive feeling is reflected by an increasing percentage. Nevertheless, about 40% say that the assignments are too difficult. An increasing number of students indicate that course materials are interesting and stimulating. In all three surveys, a clear majority of students enjoy studying their course. Only some 10% do not.

From an instructional design standpoint, OLI-developed courses are satisfactory. However, satisfaction decreases when courses are adopted from other institutions. About one-fifth of learners say that their course is unsuitable for Hong Kong students. Students prefer to have more local applications in their study material (see also Dhanarajan and Timmers, 1991).

Although it is always the case that only a minority of students criticise a course, their comments are revisited when there is an update of the course concerned.

## STUDY SUPPORT SYSTEM

Undoubtedly, distance learning requires self-discipline on the part of learners; however, there are times when isolated learners need assistance to further their study. Support provided by the OLI includes tutorials, comments on tutor-marked assignments and telephone counselling.

**Telephone counselling services.** Students appear to find telephone tutoring more acceptable as they gain experience in using it (the percentage of dissatisfied students dropped from about 40% to 25% after the first year). However, few students use the service (about 20% ) or claim it is useful (about 27%). These data may explain why over 67% of students indicate their preference for face-to-face contact.

**Tutorials.** Most agree that "tutorials help me to understand the study material and solve my study problems". Those who disagree decreased from 19% to 14% between the first and fourth evaluations. Furthermore, students' demand for more tutorials still remains at a relatively high level (over 50%). In addition, the percentage learning on their own as compared with attending tutorials is saturated at 26%. Overall, there is an increasing trend in those satisfied with their tutorial support. The dissatisfaction percentage has dropped from 23% to 15% over the past three semesters. These data suggest that students tend to rely on, and prefer tutorial support. The trend reflects students' increasing familiarity with the function of tutorials. Learners indicate that the percepption of tutorial effectiveness is affected by their location, time scheduling and tutor quality.

**Assignment comments.** Although most learners (above 70%) agree that "the comments on a tutor-marked assignment (TMA) help them to study", they still want more detailed comments and suggestions. This desire has increased significantly from 20% to 65% over the past three presentations. Students tend be increasingly more demanding in terms of the quality of tutorials, especially as they progress to more advanced courses.

## CONCLUSION

It is gratifying to discover that OLI learners are in general satisfied with their courses. Satisfaction pertains to both course materials and OLI's study support system. Feedback indicates that Hong Kong learners are still unfamiliar with the distance learning concept (i.e. they prefer lectures to self-study), but an increasing demand on the quality and amount of tutors' input shows they are attempting to exploit the system to their greatest advantage.

'Distance' in Hong Kong is of a social rather than geographic nature. Learning places are limited and there is high value on educational qualification. Learning traditions involve face-to-face lecturing, a special challenge for a distance teaching institution which prepares self-contained study materials. Hong Kong is experiencing an era of momentous social and political change. Not only is the society transforming from an industrial to post-industrial economy, it will rejoin China as a Special Administrative Region in 1997. Accordingly, there are accelerated demands for flexible and open learning opportunities. OLI's students indicate an ability to adjust to distance teaching methods and their willingness to let the Institute know their needs. They also demonstrate that distance education is as pertinent for learners in a compact urban setting as in large (Canada, Australia) or geographically complex (Indonesia) states.

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